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## The French Atlantic Cable Office and Personnel

By THE REV. CANON ROBERT MERRY

The phone rang late one morning a few months ago and a voice introduced himself as an undertaker from Concord, NH. He asked if I was the Robert Merry who was an Episcopal minister. I said I was and he continued, "There is a family here named Facey who have requested that you as a former friend of the deceased, Kenneth Facey, hold a graveside service at his burial in Mayflower Cemetery."

Accordingly we met at the graveside and I said a few words of appreciation for my former friend and Partridge Academy schoolmate. And as we turned from the scene, a familiar face caught my eye, and the person introduced herself as Margaret Hastings, younger sister of my 5th and 6th grade teacher where, what was called "The Village Grammar School" -- later the "Green School" -- was located. Then quite moved by the occasion, I took a flyer and asked, "Didn't I marry you in a mock wedding in the play yard one day?"

She did indeed remember, for who can forget one's wedding? This served to conjure up a whole series of recollections especially surrounding the old Cable Office which operated, in my youth, at the corner of Washington and St. George sts and whose imposing building still stands there.

My Partridge Academy schoolmate was the son of one of the managers of the Cable Office that functioned in Duxbury since the landing of the Cable in 1869, when Western Union took it over after World War II. The landing coincided chronologically with the junction of the 2 halves of the railroad laid across the continent as speeches given on the occasion of the landing mentioned. The moment of the landing was a great day for Duxbury probably, rivaling in excitement the completion of Gurnet Bridge in 1895, the laying of the cornerstone of the Myles Standish Monument 24 years earlier, and the celebration of the town's 250th anniversary in a huge tent at the base of Captain's Hill surmounted at the time by a still uncompleted tribute to the town's founder.

This article will deal principally with the Old Cable

Massachusetts were belching fire and smoke in salute. A huge tent had been erected on Abram's Hill to shelter 600 banqueting guests while thousands more crowded around to watch the festivities.

"Meanwhile work crews had been struggling to finish laying the cable across the marshes to the tent (a protrusion of the original cable can still be seen below the sea wall at Rouses' Point Beach) so greetings could be exchanged with France during the ceremonies (congratulations were indeed received from Napoleon III) a task hitherto deemed impossible. At about 6 pm the laborers triumphantly appeared with the end of the cable and ran right into the tent. Amid band music and deafening salutes of artillery, people jumped onto the tables and cheered -- the final completion."

It was a stupendous achievement and its celebration was in keeping.

I would like as further background to indicate some steps in the uses of electrical transmission from its early beginnings. First, it must be acknowledged that electricity as a power and mystery had been known since Homer's time in the 12th Century, B.C. Primitive man had feared the power expressed, for example, in lightning and certain rocks were known to possess magnetic properties. Benjamin Franklin had advanced the knowledge of this power in the famous story of the key on a kite string in a thunder storm. Many others had delved into the mystery and a discovery was made that an electric spark touching one end of a copper wire could reach its other end instantaneously. It was a young artist turned scientist who saw the possibilities in this discovery and meditating on shipboard around 1832, put them into primitive use. His name was Samuel Morse. He traveled to Congress and London and Paris with his new invention, but got no support although the French saw the value in his invention and promptly with a London Associate put it to use. Congress came through with funds, and on May 24, 1844, a message was sent and received from Baltimore to Washington. This means of communication was the essential instrument of communication during the Civil War and aroused the regiments of the Northern States in 1861 in the amount of 75,000 troops at Lincoln's command to the defense of Washington as Rosamond Truden's husband reported in a manuscript she lent to me as I was preparing this article.

Meanwhile, work was going on to lay cable across the ocean connecting Europe and America. In all, 4

"Atlantic French Cable to Brest, France, 3333 miles."

One of our best meat customers was named Green and he lived with his spinster daughter on Cedar St. A gentleman whose name I do not recall lived above the office in the residence now occupied by Bob and Lisa Loring. He organized a theater trip for Duxbury youngsters to the Keith Theater in Boston when it took an hour and a half to go there. The most signal community achievement of these cable officers was the establishment of Episcopal worship with the remodeling of the Union District Schoolhouse as a church around 1880. When St. John's Church celebrated its centennial anniversary, I was amazed to make this discovery, that there had been no Episcopal worship in Duxbury until that late date. Jack Post tells of these beginnings and holds a file on this first Episcopal worship center. The building was again remodeled to a residence when Miss Lucy Sprague Sampson bought the present church building for \$25 from the Methodists in 1894 and remodeled it at great expense before its consecration by Bishop Lawrence in June 1900. A vestige of these events remains in the continuing name of the street i.e., Chapel St. Jack Post loves to tell of the 2 cable officers named Green, one from Spain, of a swarthy complexion; the other from England, with a typical English pale face. One was called "Light Green," the other "Dark Green."

At this time the streets surrounding the Cable Office building were filled with shops and stores beginning with Tony Lucas's Barber Shop, now moved to Old Cove Rd. on Powder Point. The Cable Office building itself was built by Ezra Weston to serve as the Duxbury Bank in 1833 and still preserves the stately lines of the Greek Revival in architecture that prevailed in that period. I remember well stopping in at the office on freezing cold days to get warmed up as I paddled meat from my father's market in our open meat wagons. The visit to the office was an awesome experience with people bent over instruments clacking away like a flock of chickens at feeding time. These instruments were donated to the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society and reassembled by Ladd MacMillan and Robert Enemark to form part of the King Caesar House Museum and can be viewed there when that facility is open. The work of the Cable Office was moved to Chatham, where it continues today as Western Union.

Other buildings and enterprises submerged the

This article will deal principally with the Old Cable Office and some of its managers and my own recollections surrounding it. The business enterprise centering around this office grew into one of the most important town activities. Few events in Duxbury can compare with the story of the cable's laying across the ocean floor and its landing in our town. I researched the why and wherefore of the choice of Duxbury as the landing location, but could only discover that the shipbuilding era being over as speeches I read at the event affirmed it was simply because this was a beautiful place with its Pilgrim antecedents and the people in charge knew that Duxbury folks would understand and appreciate the honor thus conferred upon it.

I can't recount the landing in words that do justice to the event, but the reports in the *Duxbury Book*, which I have permission to quote tell in eloquent terms what it was like. I am greatly indebted also to Alexandra Earle, executive secretary of the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society for opening up the files of the Drew House for my use.

The *Duxbury Book* article picks up from a separate booklet published by the society and written by Franklin Hoyt, and is available for a modest cost at the Drew House. These few paragraphs capture the excitement of that gala event.

"In anticipation of the landing of the Cable, Duxbury Town Meeting voted for a mammoth celebration held July 27, 1869. They invited the Governor of Massachusetts, the Mayor of Boston, and a host of lesser celebrities. When the day arrived, the Plymouth band was on hand, 2 cannons of the 2nd Light Battery of

the ocean connecting Europe and America. In all, 4 corporations were organized to accomplish this task. In 1858, Cyrus Field, a wealthy American capitalist who had made a fortune in manufacturing paper, funded a cable that connected Ireland and Newfoundland. It was an arduous task and 5 times it had to be done over. Finally

in 1866, it was discovered that the insulation on the cable had rotted, and the project was abandoned. Meanwhile, 2 corporations merged and the French Atlantic Cable Company completed the laying of the cable by the mammoth ship, *Great Eastern*. A significant aspect of the laying of this cable was that it did not touch any shore occupied by the English.

It landed first at the island of St. Pierre, then over the continental shelf past the Maine coast and down clinging to the shallow waters of Duxbury. My early hunch was that this was a means of humiliating the British, ancient enemies of France. But deeper search revealed that it was a British Lord who helped master mind the project from the beginning, and as usual the British won out, merging several strands of support and initiating the Anglo-American Cable Company in 1873.

My earliest recollections of the Cable Office go back to World War I, when a platoon of Marines was billeted here to protect the installation. (Katherine Pillsbury, Duxbury's town historian, says this also happened in World War II). I recall how upset my mother was that these strong young men sportingly dressed in their flashy dress uniforms came up the hill to our house and asked to date our 2 teenage older sisters. I remember well the post railing that ran around the marsh from the Drew House to King Caesar Rd. It carried a message that read,

Other buildings and enterprises submerged the distinguished classical building in a welter of cheap structures that stood long after their usefulness had ceased. After Tony Lucas' Barber Shop there was Nass's plumbing shop, and across the street vestiges of Briggs livery stables, Jacob Schiff's shoe store and the First National Grocery Store. These constituted an eyesore in a beautiful section of Duxbury and one person, Edna Peterson, took the bull by the horns, organized a cleanup and achieved the lovely river views we have today. A boulder placed under a grove of cedars reminds us of her work and of so many cultural touches other summer residents have bestowed upon our town.

If I may bring the story of St. John's Church up to date from its beginning by the Cable Office managers, the church building was used at first as a summer chapel and Episcopal clergy came and went, one of them discovering and publicizing the location of Myles Standish's grave. The area above the narthex was later made into a winter chapel with a woodburning stove and The Rev. John Philbrick and his devoted wife Helen took over the parish in 1939. They hauled wood, and carried water to the Spartan building. Helen used to carry a gallon jug of water all the way from Cedar St. for the altar flowers. The rector bugged the vestry to put in town water to no avail until Helen simply refused to carry the water, depositing the glass gallon jug inside the fence next to the Cable Office and announcing her decision to her husband. The crisis thus precipitated was solved by the first installation of town water in 1941.

These and many other recollections flooded my mind as I turned away from the grave of my schoolmate, Kenneth Facey, and recalled also that mock wedding with Margaret Hastings so long ago. We buried Kenneth in a traditional burial plot, but this burial custom is fast being replaced by cremation and the depositing of the remaining ashes. A friend was commenting the other day on the tragedy of our cultural breakdown and volunteered, "I believe the moral disaster we are living with can only be reversed by a natural catastrophe like an earthquake or a declaration of war." I agreed with his sentiments, but was not quick-witted to point out that we all are living with the reality of personal catastrophe, namely death. And the practice of cremation is a grim reminder that this apparent disaster of transition can be seen not as a denial of life, but as a demonstration of its essence. Was it not Prospero in Shakespeare's *Tempest* who said, "We are such things as dreams are made of, and our little life is rounded with a sleep."

This can provide us with the basic conviction that we belong to a home that is elsewhere than the narrow confines of this planet, and provide us with that detachment of mind and heart that can give us joy in living. I did feel, as I reflected on Margaret's reminder of our wedding, that a life beyond this life was available for me and I felt a surge of gratitude for it. Such benefits come from the laying to rest of the remains of a friend.



THE FRENCH ATLANTIC CABLE—THE CHILDREN AND SCANDALS IN DUXBURY BAY—  
LANDING OF THE CABLE AT THE HUMMOCK, DUXBURY, MASS.—FROM A SKETCH BY OUR SPECIAL ARTIST.